



City of Rockville

MEMORANDUM

March 4, 2010

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Steven Mader, Superintendent of Parks and Facilities

SUBJECT: Responses to Planning Commission Recommendations

The Recreation and Parks Department reviewed the Planning Commission's February 24, 2010 memorandum to the Mayor and Council and have the following staff responses.

- 1) The cost of acquiring land for parks is a big challenge for the future. It is suggested that the payment a developer would make in place of providing public use space as specified by the zoning ordinance (25.17.01d), known as the "fee in lieu", should be kept high enough for it to be a real source for parkland acquisition. The fee charged on a project should be comparable to the actual costs of acquiring parkland in the parts of the City where the development is occurring, since land costs vary depending on specific location.

Staff response: *The Recreation and Parks Department agrees that the acquisition of land is a very big challenge. The PROS Plan does make the statement that fee-in-lieu is the only realistic source of funds for parkland acquisition. Recreation and Parks staff recommend the PROS plan not make a strong policy recommendation on amount of fee-in-lieu to be extracted. The amount should be included in the zoning ordinance.*

- 2) The PROS Plan should be more proactive in its recommendations by including potential locations for open space, including pocket parks, in neighborhoods that are determined to be underserved (such as East Rockville and Twinbrook) and strategies for acquiring them. The upcoming revision of the Comprehensive Plan also may offer an opportunity to identify sites throughout the City that would be appropriate for acquisition of parkland using, in part, funds collected in lieu of open space.

Staff response: *The PROS Plan (on page 5) gives general recommendations for where more parks/open space is recommended. Other recommendations are on pages 5-6 and*

5-22. *The Recreation and Parks Department believes the recommendations are specific enough for the purposes of the PROS Plan. Given the nature of current land use in most PROS underserved areas - that are mostly residential - it is important to note that land acquisition for parkland use would almost certainly entail replacing homes with parks. This is a difficult strategy to support. Recreation and Parks staff recommends that more specific language be included in the Comprehensive Master Plan rather than in the PROS Plan.*

- 3) Strengthen statements that RedGate will remain a PROS resource, even if it stops operating as a golf course.

Staff response: *Recreation and Parks staff agrees and recommends adding language that RedGate remain a PROS resource if it ever stops operating as a golf course. In addition, the Recreation and Park Advisory Board supported the policy statement that RedGate remain a golf course.*

- 4) Observe that storm water management (SWM) facilities and PROS space can co-exist beneficially when sufficient design focus is placed on the amenity character of the SWM water feature in the PROS setting. However, with population growth putting pressure on limited supply of PROS space, diminishing usable PROS space by occupying it with SWM should be weighed carefully.

Staff response: *The PROS Plan does support the design focus related to stormwater management facilities. Page 4-41 of the plan gives examples of recent projects and recommends support of future projects. Staff recommends no changes to the PROS Plan document.*

- 5) Widen the gap between resident and non-resident fee structures. Rockville residents already support Recreation and Parks with their taxes so non-residents should be expected to pay the full cost of their participation. Many programs seem to fill quickly with non-resident registration, indicating that non-resident fees could be increased.

Staff response: *Staff does not concur that this statement is correct and is not aware of any data indicating that programs fill with non-residents. Cost recovery is described on pages 4-39 and 4-40 and the major conclusion statement is on page 5-12. Seventy-two percent of those questioned in surveys for the PROS Plan agreed that the cost to participate in programs and classes offered by the City of Rockville is reasonable. Non-resident fees are generally set at "market" levels – i.e. comparable to fees charged by the County, Gaithersburg, and the private and non-profit sectors. Resident fees are then discounted from market levels – anywhere from 10% to 50%. The more heavily discounted resident fees are generally in programs that serve needy individuals/neighborhoods as well as senior citizen services. Enrollment for classes is generally open to residents only for two weeks prior to allowing non-resident enrollment. Staff agrees that non-resident fees should be set to cover all costs (when possible given*

competitor/market fees), and to bring in as much revenue as possible, thereby relieving pressure on need for revenues from City residents. Staff recommends no changes to the PROS plan recommendations.

- 6) Fees for some facilities, specifically community center party rooms, may be high relative to comparable private facility rental options for events such as childrens' birthday parties. Therefore, these rooms (Twinbrook Community Center was cited as an example) may not be utilized as much as they could be. Lower fees for community rooms in neighborhoods may make them more financially accessible to local residents and increase usage. Increased usage can also serve as a form of marketing (by increasing word-of-mouth, etc.) that may further increase demand for facility rentals.

Staff response: *Fees for facilities is an area of intense focus and analysis by staff. Annually, staff surveys fees for all similar public and private sector facilities and sets fees at average levels – not too high, not too low. If facility use is low, fee increases are postponed. Fees are increased where staff believes the market will bear the higher fees. Staff recommends no change to the plan.*

- 7) PROS marketing should be targeted to underused facilities and programs rather than those that are already at or over capacity. Do not market to groups that we know, through surveys and other data, are unlikely to respond to efforts.

Staff response: *Marketing recommendations are found on pages 5-10, 5-11 and 5-14. The overall marketing plan is centered on the Department's mission; promoting participation for all Rockville citizens in diverse, interesting, and high quality recreational and leisure opportunities. Most marketing is done in City publications: The Rockville Channel 11, the City website, Recreation Guide, "This Week in Rockville" – all of these are provided to the entire City population. Targeted marketing efforts are generally in neighborhoods surrounding the Recreation Centers or to members of facilities, such as Swim & Fitness, RedGate, and Senior Center. Staff does not concur that any one of our facilities is at or over capacity. Staff requests that the Planning Commission identify which facilities they believe are underused and/or are at capacity. Staff recommends no change to the plan.*

- 8) The City's recreational facilities and programs should complement those that are already offered by private enterprise, rather than competing with the private sector. The private sector provides valuable recreational services and choices that, to some extent, can reduce what the City needs to provide and thereby help to reduce public costs.

Staff response: *The plan discusses private enterprise on page 4-3 and elsewhere, but does not take a strong policy position. Staff is confident there is an appropriate mix of public and private recreational facilities in Rockville and in the Outer Rockville Recreation Area (ORRA). The City receives virtually no complaints from either residents*

or owners of private recreation facilities regarding the City's public facilities. Staff recommends no change to the plan.

- 9) Provide wide-ranging and alternative recreational opportunities that are sought by Rockville's demographically and culturally diverse population.

Staff response: *The PROS plan addresses the demographic and cultural diversity of Rockville's population. Several recommendations are listed on page 4-32. The ethnic and cultural communities surveyed felt equally welcome at City Parks and used them with similar frequency. Page 5-5 also has recommendations for continuing to develop Rockville as a cultural destination through Recreation and Parks programs and activities. Staff recommends no changes to the plan.*

- 10) More indoor open play space is needed, especially for children in the wintertime.

Staff response: *Based on surveys and focus group meetings, the greatest need for recreation services include teens, lower income populations, and the disabled. On page 5-16, the plan makes specific recommendations for these groups. Staff believes there is sufficient supply of indoor open space play areas. Open use of gyms and facilities at City Recreation Centers is a priority in the summer and during non-school hours. Computer centers and game rooms are primarily scheduled as drop in facilities. Staff agrees that providing indoor open play space is a priority, which is being sufficiently addressed.*

- 11) The City should explore partnering with local civic associations, garden groups, etc. to help maintain smaller neighborhood parks and thereby help defray maintenance costs. There have been successful examples of citizen groups supporting park maintenance in the past (such as the College Gardens Garden Club and Twinbrook Citizens Association) and the City may want to encourage more volunteer assistance.

Staff response: *On page 5-2 the plan recommends strengthening and/or formalizing partnerships with neighborhoods and businesses. The plan also recommends involving the public in as many ways as possible in planning, maintenance, and programming of PROS resources. Staff recommends no changes to the plan*

- 12) Community gardens are a PROS resource that warrants supply/demand analysis to determine if there will be a need for more in the future. The City also may want to allow residents to have the option to rent the same plots year-round so that they can be continuously maintained.

Staff response: *Staff agrees community gardens are a major benefit to the residents of Rockville. There was no comparable data available to complete a supply/demand analysis for garden plots. Staff recommends adding specific language to the plan in support of additional community gardens wherever possible. The option of renting the same plots on a year round basis is an administrative procedure, which does not belong in the PROS Plan. Staff will evaluate this recommendation separate from the plan.*

- 13) Emission control of City-operated lawn mowers and sensitivity to other environmental aspects of park maintenance should be encouraged.

Staff response: *On page 5-3, the PROS Plan supports the City's Sustainability Initiatives, including recommending sustainable maintenance practices at all parks and facilities*

- 14) Bicycle and pedestrian lanes/infrastructure in the Rockville Pike Corridor should be counted as contributing to the Complete Streets concept rather than as park or open space. Need to decide what is really considered public use space in different (urban v. suburban) parts of the City. Linear bike and pedestrian paths should count only if they are located within a larger scheme of open space.

Staff response: *The only bike/pedestrian lanes included as a PROS resource are the ones currently located in a larger scheme of open space. For example the bikeway suggested in the Rockville Pike Plan would only be included if it were part of a larger open space scheme.*

- 15) The concept of pathway marking (yellow brick road idea at the bottom of page 5-6) for wayfinding is an excellent alternative to increasing sign clutter.

Staff response: *Staff agrees.*

- 16) In addition to promoting bicycle and pedestrian access, minimize the impacts of parking and vehicular access to Citywide facilities on surrounding neighborhoods by analyzing alternatives that would be less disruptive (such as providing access to the Senior Center from Gude Drive).

Staff response: *Staff agrees that, whenever possible, the City should look for opportunities to provide vehicular traffic access from non-residential streets, thereby reducing the impacts to surrounding communities. However, these alternatives are often very controversial as has been the experience at the Senior Center. Staff recommends adding language to the plan that all future park designs, during the conceptual design phase, consider the least disruptive access to parks and facilities.*

Comments on Plan Analysis and Organization

- 17) The Executive Summary should be reduced in length.

Staff response: *Many people will only read the Executive Summary. Staff believes the Executive Summary is appropriate.*

- 18) The pool of cities chosen to illustrate “best practices” in Chapter 4 should be limited to providing programmatic examples that Rockville can learn from and consider

implementing. Following best practices from places of innovation is good. However, direct comparisons between these cities and Rockville should not be made (e.g. top of page 4-25 and Table 4-2) as they are very different from Rockville in terms of population size, geographic location, and other characteristics.

Staff response: *The intent of Table 4-2 was to provide information on the cities used to find best practices, not to do a comparison. While these cities are different from Rockville, it is entirely possible to study and emulate programs and services provided by them. For example, Austin, TX is very different from Rockville but does a great job with its “Targeting Teens” initiative. A similar program would serve Rockville teens and their families very well. Staff recommends changing the title of Table 4-2 from “Comparison of City of Rockville to Case Study Cities” to “Case Study Cities”.*

- 19) The railroad right-of-way is a more logical division between the east and west halves of the City than Rockville Pike because it is a more formidable physical boundary and it makes more sense to use it for analysis from a planning perspective. The PROS Plan understandably uses the Pike because it matches the division used in the City’s biannual citizen surveys. The City should consider changing the boundary used in the survey and in future plans, even if it is too late to change it for the PROS Plan. (The PROS Plan recognizes the railroad tracks as a barrier to access to PROS facilities in its walking distance analysis on page 4-21 and does support using this boundary for analysis.)

Staff response: *Staff agrees the boundary used for future citywide surveys should be evaluated. However, the PROS Plan used the same sectors as the bi-annual Citizen Survey, which is appropriate and allows for comparisons between the results and recommendations of both documents.*

- 20) Add population of east, west and central sections of Rockville from Table 3-1 to tables 4-7 and 4-8 that show PROS resources by City slice.

Staff response: *Staff recommends adding a bullet at the bottom of tables 4-7 and 4-8 stating “see table 3-1 for population statistics.”*

- 21) Figure 4-6 on page 4-24 could be more meaningful and visually clear if areas that are not residential are blocked out (such as the Tower Oaks business area) and if PROS resources outside of, but adjacent to City boundaries, are included. The map would then better focus on truly underserved areas.

Staff response: *The purpose of the map was to form the basis for more detailed analysis. The map was produced at a larger scale and reduced in size to fit into the document. Creating the map was a very complex procedure. Staff recommends no changes to figure 4-6.*

22) The Chapter 5 introductory statement on page 5-4 that “The greatest need is in central and east Rockville” warrants more precision. Qualify further as “The greatest need is in the east, portions of central Rockville, and Rockville Pike.” Much of the central portion is served well. Only isolated areas exhibit this need. The bald statement, as summary, does not stand scrutiny.

Staff response: Staff agrees to add the qualifying statement.

cc: Scott Ullery, City Manager
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